

THE FRIENDLY INVASION OF AMERICAN FORCES IN WORLD WAR II

by **William A. Bentson**

Major William A. Bentson served in General Headquarters, Southwest Pacific area from April 1942 until September 1943 before promotion to Warrant Officer in New Guinea. He married a Queensland war bride and returned in 1964, with his family, following his retirement from the Army.

The first American military units arrived in Brisbane, 22 December 1942, on seven ships, in a convoy escorted from the United States by the cruiser U.S.S. *Pensacola*. This convey was on the way to the Philippines but was diverted to Brisbane, after 7 December 1942.

There were 4500 troops in this convey and they disembarked on wharves along the Brisbane River and marched or were loaded on to trucks and taken to Eagle Farm Race Course. It was the only venue where this many troops could be accommodated. Tents had been erected by the Australian army in the centre of the track. This area became known as Camp Ascot.

On 19 March 1942, General Macarthur arrived from the Philippines and assumed command of the United States Army Forces in the Far East. By agreement among the governments of Australia, United Kingdom, Netherlands and United States, the South West Pacific Area was established on 18 April and General Macarthur assumed command.

By October 1943, there were 92,263 U.S. troops in New Guinea and 102,578 U.S. troops in Australia. Of these troops, 75,902 were in the Greater Brisbane Area. These do not include U.S. Naval Personnel totalling 13,000 ashore in Australia.

Americans were stationed in every corner of Australia, a great social and economic shock to most communities. They were the first foreigners most Australians had ever met. The cultural difference was very noticeable. The Australians knew more about America, mainly through American movies, music and entertainers. The knowledge the Americans had of Australia was limited to Boomerangs, Kangaroos and that it was an island continent.

In most cases, we found the Australians very hospitable and friendly. We were taken into their homes, dated their daughters and in time got to understand their colloquialisms, which at times put us in embarrassing positions before we became familiar with word usage. In one case I was visiting a family with a baby in crib and expressed my opinion that the baby “was a cute little bugger.” The young lady I was with called me to one side and explained that the use of use of bugger was inappropriate in these circumstances and informed me of its Australian meaning.

There were many conflicts between the American and Australian troops. They were primarily due to the Americans receiving high pay, tailored uniforms, an extensive range of items in their canteens, the availability of cigarettes and liquor, attention given them by taxi drivers, m shopkeepers, and the 'sheilas'.

The most notable riot has come to be known as the Battle of Brisbane. Having been a bystander on both nights, I can say that there were very few American troops involved, except a number of U.S. Military Police. The death of one Australian, and the wounding of several others by one American Military Policeman, was a very unfortunate incident.

On the second night of the riots, retribution was inflicted on many Americans caught at the intersection of Queen and Edward Streets. This punishment put 21 Americans in hospital. During the next few nights all military troops were confined to their quarters.

Individually, the Yanks and Aussies liked each others in most cases. Numerous minor conflicts, pub brawls and the like, tend to overshadow the good relationship, maintained to this day. Bitter feelings against the Americans did exist. For example, the censors noted in one letter by an Australian to his father, “I said I would never put another uniform on after I got out of this one, but if they declared open season on the Yanks, I would be in it, that’s one war I would get to with the greatest of pleasure.”

Several books have been written expressing the relationships between Yanks and Aussie Girls, *Heroes and Lovers*, *I loved those Yanks*, *Over paid, over sexed and over here* and *Yanks Down Under 1941-1945*. There were over 12,000 marriages between U.S. servicemen and Australian girls during the war. Having been one to participate, my wife and I will celebrate our 50th Wedding Anniversary in February 1993.

The most amusing incident I can remember, during the war, was at the Walt Disney movie *Bambi*. My wife and I were attending the Wintergarden Theatre. During the saddest portion of the movie, when

there was complete silence and teaful eyes, for Bambi was lost in the woods and crying “Mother, Mother, where is my Mother”, a loud Digger’s voice called out “She’s out with a Bloody Yank”. This caused the greatest outburst of laughter ever heard in the theatre.

One could go on endlessly about the good days and the bad days of the war but the sentiments expressed in the words from an old song of the war days, “The Aussies and the Yanks are together today as they never were before” are as relevant today, as they were then.



A Woman Volunteer sewing up an A.I.F. Man's Trousers at the Welfare Recreation Rooms in Brisbane — John Oxley Library